Leigh Fondakowski

_Stories from Jonestown_. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2013. 312 pp. (Cloth US$ 20.49)

Leigh Fondakowski, one of the creators of the award-winning play, _The Laramie Project_, undertook a study of Jonestown at the encouragement of the theater community in the San Francisco Bay area. In 2002 she and a team of researchers embarked on a multiyear, cross-country investigation that led to interviews with dozens of former members of the People’s Temple. The resulting “docudrama,” _The People’s Temple_, first ran at Berkeley Repertory Theatre in 2005. _Stories from Jonestown_ documents the research behind that production.

Many former members refused to be interviewed, and the team had special difficulties reaching African American survivors. Ultimately, they managed to speak to 75 people. Fondakowski presents portraits from about 40 individuals connected to the People’s Temple—members, relatives of members, journalists, and investigators. Also included are biographical statements crafted in Jonestown as part of an oral history project. With the rationale that “the voices need to be heard,” Fondakowski hopes to move public understanding about “cults” and “brainwashing” past stereotypes, and to give respectful voice to those involved, both the dead and the living.

The portraits relate the history of Jonestown and reveal its effects thirty years later. Some survivors wrote out personal statements. Other pieces are based on material from the interviews, deftly edited by Fondakowski and her research team. The survivors have a breadth of insights, and Fondakowski assembles a coherent narrative through their separate recollections. She communicates scholarly understandings in an interesting way, one highly accessible to general readers, and documents the interview process with the survivors as well as the stories of their survival. She is changed by their stories, for through them she is confronted with the seductive nature of idealist messages.

In its glory the People’s Temple was a model for an integrated society. Racially and culturally diverse, participants were drawn by a shared vision of social justice, whether their personal faith was based in Christianity or atheistic Marxism. The accounts are arranged to document the growth of the People’s Temple as it moved from Indiana to California, and then to Guyana. Eyewitness statements deliver a play-by-play of Congressman Leo Ryan’s 1978 visit to the Jonestown Agricultural Project that ended in his assassination and the suicide-murders of 917 others. The account of the event is heartbreaking. Returning to the United States, members faced “recrimination, suspicion and fear.”

© HOLLY FOLK, 2015 | DOI: 10.1163/22134360-08903043
This is an open access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial 3.0 Unported (CC-BY-NC 3.0) License.
Fondakowski centralizes Jim Jones and attributes his attractiveness to a version of deprivation theory. She stresses the idealism of the joiners, and the manipulation and coercion that displaced their utopian dreams of social and racial justice. The specter of “brainwashing” hovers over the story. Fondakowski lets participants’ own words attest to their agency. Were they “mindless victims”? She believes that Jones answered members’ emotional needs and gave “simple answers.” She sides with scholars and eyewitnesses who regard most deaths as murder rather than suicide. But she manages to balance an honest acknowledgment of the coercion and entrapment that led to the final day with participants’ awareness of the choices they made. *Stories from Jonestown* reveals bonds and rifts among the survivors. Fondakowski documents a strong racial divide that challenges the idealized integration and the differing opinions about Jim Jones and life in the People’s Temple. Some gather annually for memorial services and maintain friendships throughout the year, while others shun the Jonestown Survivors Network.

Congruent with the play with which it is connected, the layout of the book uses theatrical imagery. If the theme of drama resonates in Fondakowski’s work, so too does the idea of history. In the play photographs are placed on boxes of catalogued ephemera. In the book Fondakowski tells of handling members’ personal items as if they are relics. *Stories from Jonestown* contemplates the passing of Jonestown into private and public memory. It also connects the People’s Temple to greater themes in American culture and history. The book breaks new ground with interviews discussing the impact Jonestown had on social activism in San Francisco, where the group had been so active politically. Fondakowski wonders what the “legacy” of Jonestown should be. Most survivors are beset by grief, shame, and isolation. The lives of many have been marked by profound disorganization. For some, commemorating Jonestown offers little resolution or “closure.” In an upsetting number of cases, the violence is passed down to the next generation, as several children of members have been convicted of serious crimes. Yet Fondakowski finds in the survivors much more resilience and emotional maturity.

Fondakowski’s overarch goal is to humanize the participants, and she is not afraid to show them in their weaknesses, in one instance sanctimoniously counting the drinks an interviewee consumes. Her use of the third-party voices of other survivors to report personal information individual interviewees preferred to keep private also made me uncomfortable, for while in keeping with standard practices for journalists, it cuts against the themes of trust and friendship highlighted in the book. If some of her comments seem excessively personal, it is because her research becomes a personal journey. In the beginning, Fondakowski admits her own discomfort embarking on the topic of Jonestown,
which she finds frightening. As she gets to know them, she comes to feel deeply about the interviewees, whom she regards as collaborators on the project. Overall, Fondakowski has succeeded in creating an empathetic portrait of a group of people who lived through and were changed by a remarkable historical experience.

Holly Folk
Liberal Studies, Western Washington University, Bellingham WA 98225, U.S.A.
Holly.Folk@wwu.edu